

4 Exams and Relevance

The relationship between formal education and the employment system has been in the focus of social debate and empirical social science research over the past decade. Several acute problems which call for intervention have increased interest in this field. Youth unemployment in the highly industrialised countries and the growing number of 'educated unemployed' in the developing countries have become pressing social and political problems. Rapidly rising educational expectations—referred to among economists as increased 'social demand' for education—are an outcome of increased opportunities for further education coupled with expectations of benefits that could accrue to the individual. What Dore refers to as 'diploma disease' and Berg as 'training robbery' [see references above] are outcomes of increased competition and examination orientation in the schools. Ulrich Teichler in the Federal Republic of Germany has explored the tendency on the part of the employment system to leave the sorting of applicants to the educational system by relying on its grading of students.

The IDS studies are attempts to test the overriding hypothesis that a major obstacle to improving the quality of education is the way scholastic attainment is used as the prime criterion for recruitment to wage and salary jobs. They have approached the problem of diploma disease via different methodological routes and by utilising data sets from a range of countries, both highly industrialised and developing. They have cooperated with several institutions outside Britain, such as the National Institute of Management, Sri Lanka, and the Institute of International Education at the University of Stockholm. The latter provided the Data Bank from the extensive evaluation study of some 20 countries, which was conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in the early 1970s. An empirical study of 'examination orientation' and its repercussions for the teaching-learning strategies employed was made possible by this data. The balance between rote learning and other types of learning was thereby elucidated. Examination orientation is associated with a ritualistic approach that goes with rote learning, with long-range adverse effects.

I could contribute to the illustrations by referring to an experience I had in a school in a remote area in Botswana. In a 7th Grade classroom the teacher was coaching the students for the impending Primary School Leaving Examination. Part of the examination was a test of general knowledge.

The teacher had written on the blackboard a series of questions which had either been given in previous exams or were of the type expected. The first was: 'who was the first Supreme Commander of NATO?' Can one think of anything less relevant in the outskirts of the Kalahari desert than this?

In the wake of rising expectations of what education can do to improve the life chances of the individual, the diploma disease has spread to all kinds of economies, so-called developed and developing alike. The only difference may be that the prospects of realising these expectations are bleaker in the latter.

The problem then becomes: what can be done to come to grips with the bad effects of the examination orientation? Evidently, and easy to say, changes in the reward system would be necessary. The dilemma is that the very notion of economic growth that has prevailed in the industrialised countries and the notion of development that has guided the policies of the international organisations are deeply ingrained with meritocratic features. I have tried to show the connection between the values determining economic growth and the selective and meritocratic features in my book *Talent, Equality and Meritocracy*.

The studies by the IDS group constitute a pioneering venture in tackling the problem of

examination orientation which is associated with growing educational as well as occupational expectations. They have also elucidated the relationship between formal qualifications and hiring practices in countries such as Mexico and Sri Lanka. As usual, they have found that realities are less well structured than theories.

Apart from testing hypotheses in the way social scientists conduct these exercises, they have also by their analysis laid the foundation for a debate on what educational policies could be envisaged which would strike a balance between scholastic ritualism and the pursuit of genuine educational values, learning for its own sake. Thereby they have also made a contribution to rethinking the concept of development, particularly the role formal education has to play in implementing the new concept.

May I finish in personal vein by saying how pleased I, and my colleagues at the Institute of International Education in Stockholm, are to have had the opportunity of cooperating with the IDS team in this venture. Scholarship in general is by its very nature an international enterprise. This applies in particular to scholarship in development studies.

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